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David R. Bowen

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Limit partisanship

By David Bowen

Special to The Clarion-Ledger

George Washington and our Founding Fathers thought political parties could be perilous for American democracy, and they were right.

Today, the fierce hostility between our two major parties makes it increasingly difficult to address the problems of a major recession or domestic and global security. The trouble is not always one of honest disagreement on issues but rather of tone and style and attitude.

Both parties have over the years been capable of sharp-edged animosity, but the party which is out of power and sinking in popularity is usually the more

shrill and militant. Today that's the Republicans.

They have pulled back from the excesses of the Bush administration and now

call for a return to what they call their traditional economic goals: cut government spending (except military), cut taxes, cut regulations, balance the budget and let the free market solve our problems. (They do not reconcile cutting taxes and balancing the budget. Despite their supply-side passion, Bushonomics developed a huge deficit, as did Reaganomics, until Reagan raised taxes three times.)

The problem with this package is that the American people are not buying it. Most people believe the unregulated free market got us into our current economic mess. They support an economic stimulus to replace declining consumption and especially more effective government regulation and oversight of the



Ron Edmonds/The Associated Press

Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee (left) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky talk to reporters

outside the White House in Washington, Wednesday, May 13, after a meeting with President Barack Obama to discuss the upcoming Supreme Court appointments.

financial instruments and institutions they believe created this recession.

Yes, they are concerned about inflation, a problem we could have a few years down the road, but they are far more concerned about deflation and unemployment now.

The Democratic and Republican parties were once even, each with about a third of voters and independents with the other third. Now the Democratic lead is more than a dozen percentage points and widening, while independents are stronger than either party. People disillusioned by the Republicans are not all turning to the Democrats.

Here in Mississippi the Republicans are thriving, and many people have difficulty understanding how President Obama got elected. (Some still believe those spurious anti-Obama e-mails circulated during the campaign and also that he didn't really win: It was all a wicked plot by ACORN.)

Post-Bush Republicans are becoming more ideologically hidebound on both economic and ethnic issues,

adopting the small-tent philosophy of Dick Cheney and Rush Limbaugh for a nation which is moving in another direction.

With people like Ronald Reagan and my late friend Jack Kemp (whose tax plan I voted for), the GOP had optimistic, big-tent happy warriors, but there's nobody around today to compete with Obama's confident, articulate, intelligent, calming, increasingly moderate persona.

I've argued for more than 20 years that rather than patch up our political parties we ought to junk them, but very few people buy that solution. Like many, I grew up with a no-party system here in Mississippi — the same as a no-discipline, no-organization, no-meaning, one-party-in-name-only system — and I liked it.

We have replaced it with obligatory, cultivated, partisan hostility, which started first in Washington and then spread to Jackson.

The fact that the Republicans are self-destructing nationally bothers me mainly because it makes both them and the Democrats less likely to compromise

and conciliate, which we badly need.

We are even reviving the semantic battles of 50 years ago and fighting over political terminology. A recent letter to the editor in this newspaper said, "We are heading toward socialism and citizens won't like it."

We have Rip Van Winkles like that who are just waking up and discovering the world around them. Here's news: We've had socialism for 75 years, and most people love it.

One third of the American economy is run by federal, state and local governments. Just try to privatize Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, disaster relief, highways, waterways, flood control, farm aid, public education or unemployment compensation, and you'll have a revolution on your hands.

Come on, Republicans. Don't let us down. We don't really want you to join the Whigs and Federalists as relics of American history.

David Bowen is a former congressman who now is a writer and consultant living in Jackson.



Bowen
Guest
columnist